

TITLE: Beirut Diary

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VOLUME: 27 ISSUE: Summer YEAR: 1983

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE

A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.



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“*There has been an explosion
at the Embassy . . .*”

BEIRUT DIARY

(b)(3)(c)

This is not, repeat not, a trip report. For whatever they may be worth, these are the blurred and confused impressions that remain after one of the most turbulent weeks I shall ever spend, the week that began Monday, 18 April 1983. I have tried to be accurate. Although I know the events I have recounted here did take place, it is hard to fix a time or a day for them now, as I sit in a safe place on my way home, writing it down.

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I had arrived in Lebanon on TDY Monday, 11 April, [redacted] in connection with my work as an economic analyst. On Sunday, 17 (b)(1) April, my office director, Bob Ames, unexpectedly flew into Beirut. He and I (b)(3)(n) were invited to attend a small dinner that evening at [redacted] Two other [redacted] officers and their wives were also invited. I was delighted to see Bob, who had not been in Beirut since 1978, and he was exhilarated to be back in town. I mentioned to Bob that thus far I had met mainly [redacted] He assured me he would get me a different view of Lebanon.

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Monday (b)(3)(n)

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Bob calls me early this morning to invite me to supper with [redacted] friend of his. We agree to meet at the Mayflower at 1930. [redacted] economics officer Hunt Janin—has arranged for us to drive to Sidon for the day with [redacted] a visiting American friend. Janin doesn't mention to me that he would rather not go, since a minor but chronic heart condition of his is acting up.

As we drive down to Sidon, I look at Damur and the many other destroyed villages on the way, thinking how, superficially, they resemble tumble-down buildings in many third world countries.

At 1500, as we are finishing an elaborate lunch, our hostess tells us there has been an explosion at the Embassy. She has known for an hour and a half, but hadn't wanted to ruin our lunch. She speaks in an unconcerned way, and when I accuse her of joking, another guest steps in to remind me that this happens to the Lebanese “all the time—we are used to it.” With sick feelings in our stomachs we pile into the car and search for radio stations with news—the stations are being rather blasé about it. As we drive back, I look at the ruined towns around me with a fresh eye. Now they are grisly.

Once in Beirut, we stop at Janin's flat to pick up his radio. Looking from the balcony, we see no smoke, nothing unusual in the direction of the

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Embassy, which gives us hope. Hunt sends in a radio message to all stations, listing us as safe and sound. Then we begin our ten-minute walk to the Embassy. The Corniche is cordoned off and a series of Marine and Lebanese Armed Forces checkpoints set up. Our local employee and visitor are turned back at the first checkpoint. We wish them Godspeed and trudge on with mounting agony to the Embassy—less than half a mile away.

A hundred yards from the Embassy, we catch sight of the new political/military officer Ellson, who had been in the Embassy at the time of the blast. He shakes his head and says he doesn't know but that many people have died. I hope to God that Bob Ames had been outside at meetings. We walk on.

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You have all seen pictures of the Embassy. By this time (1600) bulldozers and clearing machines are already at work. I catch the deputy chief of mission, Bob Pugh, and ask if any special instructions have been issued for [redacted] hoping to be told that Ames was directing our efforts from near by. Pugh shakes his head and repeats Ellson's news. There is a meeting at the Pughs' flat in the two-building Durrafard Complex—two hundred yards away—at 1800.

I remember very little here. I go to our hotel, look for a message from Bob, leave one for him, should he return.

At the meeting, I see the walking wounded, and search for faces I know. Thank God, I see many of them. The atmosphere is calm, tightly controlled. We are all looking to Bob Pugh, who has taken command efficiently. A 24-hour open line to the Department has been set up at the Draper Mission's flat in the "new" building in the Durrafard complex.

At 1900 Janin and I walk back to the Embassy. Yellow bulldozers are starting to clear the huge pile of rubble at the base of the Embassy. The front left half of the Embassy's center section no longer exists. The reinforced concrete floors have fallen away, hanging on only by their right-side anchors.

Marines, construction workers, security officers, and Embassy staff are milling around under the spotlights looking agonized, but controlled.

It occurs to me that Bob may be in the hospital, and I drag Janin off to American University Hospital. The emergency room is crowded with wounded people, anxious relatives. The staff is doing an excellent job of controlling the madness and getting people seen to.

An orderly holds up a list of admitted wounded. We scan it, see one name we know, but not Bob's. We then go through the pile of individual admit slips. Nothing. I ask nurses. Nothing. In my heart, I know already.

At the emergency room, I see two friends who are hurt but will be all right—an AID and a Commerce man. I promise to make phone calls home for them.

At 2100 we return to the Embassy. Nothing has changed except that tear gas canisters stored in the Embassy are leaking. I approach the rubble to start searching only to drop back when I get a mouthful of gas.

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Bob Pugh points out a body pinned between two floors. We stand just outside the floodlights amidst the wrecked cars and ambulances and I fix my eyes on the body trying to see around it, to look for Bob Ames.

It gets slowly colder as the hours wear on, and we continue to wait, staring hungrily first at the body suspended above, then at the heap of rubble below.

I find a friend, who has heroically and steadily directed clearing and rescue efforts, standing hunched and alone in an empty space under the floodlights. We cry a little and hold on to each other.

I return to the edge of the darkness, chatting anxiously with Pugh, Marines, and various staff.

Thank God for the Marines and their commanders—all excellent men. One wraps me up in a big blanket, for which I am grateful. Another says the men have brought coffee and a little food, which I fetch for the others. I can't bear to go too far away, for fear Bob's body will be found while I am gone.

Tuesday

At 0130 I settle down to sit on the low wall in front of the Embassy. No bodies or wounded have been pulled out since at least 1800 Monday. When will it begin? Surely they must be brought out soon.

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A friend and I walk to his flat to get me a jacket, and while there he gets a phone call from the Tunisian maid of one of the [redacted] couples—neither she nor waiting [redacted] wives have any word. They are not at the "site"—but it is clear to me that their loved ones must be dead. It was the first day at work in the [redacted] for one wife.

Janin and I break to call the Department from the Draper flat with messages for our families and my wounded friends' families. [redacted] (b)(3)(c) answers the phone—a familiar voice helps make the scene more real. Marines are everywhere in the Durradom complex, to protect Pugh, the staffers, and the Draper Mission.

We return, shivering, to our spot at the perimeter to wait.

Suddenly, at 0230, there is a commotion at the rubble heap. People cluster around one spot. A body has been found. My heart skips and I know. Christine Crocker waves me over, and asks me to identify the body. Janin and one other are holding tight on to my arms. I look briefly. Yes. I am handed his passport and wallet.

The only thing that seems to matter is that Bob not be left without the presence of someone who knows him. An Embassy officer reminds me that I must retrieve all his papers.

My demands to ride with the ambulance to the morgue are deflected and I follow the ambulance with Janin in his auto.

As we arrive at the morgue at 0330 the Civil Defense Forces try to keep me out, waving Janin in instead. They tell me it is too grisly for a woman. I ignore them, climb over the railing, and go in. Curiously, the presence of five

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other bodies on the floor doesn't affect me at all. I retrieve Bob's wedding ring, pray for his soul, and tell him goodbye. I wonder why I do not cry.

At 0400 Janin and I return to the Mayflower Hotel. Many Americans had stayed there, and the hotel staff is shocked into numbness. I tell them what I know of the dead and the living and go upstairs to Bob's room to pack his clothes. I refuse to stay alone in my own hotel room for fear of having a quiet moment to think and ensconce myself instead in Janin's flat.

At 0500 I return to the Draper Mission flat to use the 24-hour line to report positive ID. The compound is swarming with Marines. To say that their presence is reassuring is an understatement. We all are concentrating very hard on whatever task we have at hand—in order to avoid the quicksand of our emotions.

After a few hours' rest, Janin's heart condition forces him into the hospital. An Embassy officer asks me to visit two wives who are still waiting for news of their husbands and get them to focus on the problems of the Tunisian maid who had worked for a [redacted] She speaks no English and is (b)(1) rumored to have broken down. It is a brilliant sunny day—too beautiful to be (b)(3)(n) so sad. We should all be waterskiing instead.

Traffic at 1100 in Beirut is utter madness. Arlette and I abandon my car and trudge halfway across West Beirut to get to the maid's flat. The sense of urgency I feel about reaching the maid is reinforced by fear that snipers are looking for us. We seem to be safe for the moment from another car bomb since traffic has not budged in ten minutes.

We get the maid squared away, and sheltered in the flat of the DAO, Colonel Jock Craig.

It is 1500. The sense of how lucky I am is reinforced as I return to the "site" as it is now called. The Corniche is cordoned off for half a mile west of the Embassy, and I have never seen it so strangely, ominously empty. LAF and Marine checkpoints abound. I am grateful that in finding Bob so early, at least I am not still in the agony of waiting, as are so many others. Not a single body has been found since Bob's, more than 12 hours ago.

I drive off to hook up with an officer who is on secure voice to Washington. Hearing the Headquarters voices makes me realize how far away from home we are.

Back in Beirut, the "site" seems unreal. It is a heavily armed camp—hundreds of Marines standing guard, bulldozers everywhere, exhausted Red Cross people still working. Little can be heard above the din of the generators and moving equipment. Like so many others, I stand and look and wait. Still no more bodies.

I visit Janin in the hospital, only to be told on my return that bomb threats have been lodged against the hospital.

It is astonishing how far the words "Zafara Amerikya"—American Embassy—will get you in this town today. Into the hospital without a pass, through any checkpoints, whatever.

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What a release—I drive by myself to the airport at night to pick up newly arrived personnel. I find that Ellson and Assistant DAO Major Englehardt are concerned about me driving alone, and their car pulls up just as I emerge from mine. We have a few beers and relax in the lounge as we wait for the flight. It is good to see familiar faces. I drop off the TDY folks at the Mayflower. Ellson and I make supper and I drive him home, wondering whether I will make it back to the flat. After I do, the idea of remaining alone and unguarded petrifies me, so I go to stay at the DCM's residence at the Durraford, where several of us talk on into the night.

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Wednesday

Around 0300 we are told that the body of [redacted] has been found. Kind senior Embassy people are dispatched to see his wife.

Later in the morning more bodies are recovered. We get word that a large senior delegation is coming Thursday night to take the bodies home, and a great shudder runs through us all as we fear for their safety. I am no longer afraid of being sniped at or my flat bombed, except for lonely moments on a few empty streets. I go about my morning rounds of hospital and meetings at Pugh's residence. I know that the mission has had other telephoned bomb threats, i.e., "The next one will be bigger than the last," but I am fatalistically untroubled.

Until I am in the outside garage area of the Durraford Complex, still heavily guarded by Marines, when we hear three shots fired on the Corniche, northwest of the compound. All of a sudden I am rooted to the spot, not knowing whether to flee the compound as quickly as possible or make a last ditch stand where at least the Marines have weapons. The idea of staying any longer in Beirut seems shockingly arrogant and wasteful of human life. I hear some of the soldiers looking up at the surrounding buildings, muttering about possible sniper positions. I do not know whether they speak about "ours" or "theirs" and I am sick with fear. The Ambassador is meant to drive out of the complex in just a few minutes and no one knows what he will encounter on the Corniche. Nonetheless, he cannot give in and his cars speed away. I wonder how he can carry on in such danger.

I think of Janin with a heart condition in the hospital under threat of a bomb attack and wonder whether it is safer to pull him out or leave him in. Finally I stumble out of the compound into my car, having persuaded some nearby man to accompany me. Nothing in sight on the Corniche. Later we hear that one Lebanese checkpoint soldier has been shot. I suspect it was an accidental shooting by one of his comrades but I do not know.

At the evening meeting at the Pughs', we worry that the VIP plane will depart in too much of a rush, that there are more Americans' bodies yet to be found. Pugh agrees to recommend that the flight be postponed to Saturday.

I am told that I will accompany Bob's body, and while I am honored to do so, I shrink from the thoughts of my own loved ones, who will want to see and talk to me. I do not want to begin thinking and talking about my feelings.

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Diary

Thursday

In the morning I go to the American University Hospital, which is under heavy guard. No one is allowed to park near the building. Still, I see the thousands of visitors pouring in and out and think how easy it would be . . . I shout that I am from the American Embassy and no one even checks my bag.

One of my sadder jobs is to pack up a [redacted] room at the Mayflower. I see her picture—she is about my age. I tremble the whole time I am there, and cannot get out too quickly. Mayflower staff employees continue to ask me for information about their acquaintances. They are genuinely grieved, and in telling them I feel like an accomplice to the bombing. (b)(1) (b)(3)(n)

I go back to the site, and watch the hardhats cut away more floors from the center section. I find the young officer who had given me a long tour of our Military Assistance Unit the previous week. He is bitterly disillusioned, saying that he and his men had come out here John Wayne – style, believing that they could save Lebanon, only to find themselves being shot at by the Israelis and bombed by the Arabs. He is of the opinion that we should withdraw and let the people here fight it out among themselves. “They deserve each other.” Last week he showed me the famous spot where Captain Johnson drew his revolver at an Israeli tank. He knows Johnson well and said he was a quiet, sober guy—not one who would have pulled a stunt like that without good reason.

Both the Pughs are gems. They hold us all together. Bob is softspoken and warm and very efficient. Bonnie keeps a smile up as her beautiful home is trampled through by hordes of soldiers and other strangers. She is a great comfort to everyone and is constantly serving meals to all comers. One Marine colonel comments to me how outstanding [redacted] have been (b)(1) (b)(3)(n) throughout this crisis.

I go out on the street to do some shopping. The rest of the city seems very normal. How can they live so routinely through this? It must twist them somehow.

I finally run out of things to do, and sit at the Pughs’ staring into the distance, hoping that someone will give me a job so that I do not have to think. A Marine officer who spent several years fighting in Vietnam tells me kindly that he knows I need sleep and half-orders me to a back bedroom in the Pughs’. Thank the Lord for people who are so strong and gentle.

Evening. I am asked to go through the apartment of one of the station officers and look for a will. I drive out in the pitch black worrying that their apartment is being watched. I cling to my walkie-talkie, listening for any warning. I must abandon the car in the Beirut traffic and walk the last quarter mile. Fortunately the concierge accompanies me upstairs. I inform him and the neighbors and again feel like a criminal. I go through the apartment, trembling, hastily.

As long as I am near the hospital, I visit Janin. The young American who accompanied us to Sidon is in the room. He is gleefully telling us about his

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secret trip up to Tripoli in a hired car. He is even more ignorant than I about this country and for a brief moment I hate him for so stupidly endangering himself.

I trudge back into the Pughs' with a heavy armload of the papers I had collected and must appear to be right on the edge as my officer from Vietnam, who is leaving for dinner with friends, pulls me out the door and tells me I need to get out and enjoy myself. The four of us go to an Italian restaurant and quietly have a lot to drink. Later in the evening, this pillar of strength gives way and begins to cry very hard.

Friday

We are on edge as the delegation visit begins. The [redacted] will all be moved up to Yarze tonight for a private meeting with [redacted]

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I visit the hospital while the delegation is also there, and see lots of jeeps with Marines surrounding the place. They have been outstanding—unfailingly polite but determined to do their job and protect us. Janin will be released tomorrow.

We assemble at Yarze in the Ambassador's study. John says a few words and we all order drinks. The survivors are holding up remarkably well—in part thanks to one Embassy officer who has barely eaten or slept in four days, but continues to be a rock.

The widows and I are driven back down in an armored Surete car. I am the last to be dropped off and I note that the driver has an automatic tucked under his leg. Nonetheless, I slump down in the car to keep my head low. As we drive down the Corniche toward the Pughs', the first LAF checkpoint refuses to let my Surete driver through. Cursing the imbecility of the Lebanese, I walk along the silent moonlit Corniche imagining what a perfect target I present.

I have gotten used to the idea of departing tomorrow morning, and am suddenly told that it is off. I will not be on the plane.

Saturday

In the morning the Embassy Americans pile on two buses to go out to the departure ceremony. I am shocked to see what a small group we in fact are. It is a lumbering, big-bellied plane that seems to occupy the whole runway. The Marine, Navy, and Lebanese Armed Forces honor guard is in place—the Marine contingent commanded by my captain from the Military Assistance Unit. Again, it is brilliantly hot and sunny and I am thankful for an excuse to put on my sunglasses. We file past the press cattlewagons to stand at our appointed places. The click of shutters is all that can be heard. Soon the VIP delegation walks up and the slow, slow, cortege of hearses begins. One by one, a six-man contingent—four Marines and two Navy—walks each casket up into the belly of the plane. After the first two hearses leave—four caskets—there is an unbearably long, hot wait for another. Where are they? The strain begins to show on everyone but the honor guard. Finally the arrivals resume. It is

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impersonal—the caskets are draped with flags and we don't know whose they are. People begin to lose control only when the last casket emerges—it is carried by six Marines, so we know it is the extremely well liked young Marine who is being carried in.

The plane spews blasts of hot and cold air in our faces as it revs up interminably for departure. Some of us lag behind on the way back to the buses so that we can watch the plane disappear. I whisper my goodbyes. A man twice my age holds on to me and begins to cry. I am only numb.

I am told by my officer from Vietnam that it is impossible to understand how powerful the blast was unless you go into the building, stand near the spot where the car was parked, and look up and out. I go and the enormity of the bomb hits me for the first time. I look straight up and see nothing but a shaft of blue sky. The enormous upward force of the thing was overwhelming. I look down. I am standing on a pile of rubble. To one side there is a great hole that extends down at least 20 feet. I look out toward the sea and see with a new eye the burnt and crushed cars, the railing along the sidewalk that was blown into the sea, and the great hunks of reinforced concrete lying around me.

Meanwhile, concerns about a next attack are mounting. One of my Marine officer friends is changing his rental car every other day and inspecting it carefully each time before he gets in. Lebanese Armed Forces guards are posted at the major military hotels. Concertina wire blocks the streets. Somebody even decides to install speed bumps at the western end of the Corniche. It is a well-meant gesture but it irritates me—speed bumps are easier to cross at high speed than low.

Sunday

I drive up to Byblos and Jounieh with a friend—it is another perfect day and I want to do something reasonably normal. We sit on a wall overlooking a herd of goats and the sea and we start to regain our feelings of normalcy. My friend notes that the road is usually crowded at that time of the day, and wonders if the Lebanese know something we don't. Then we hear shots down below and the ominous, anxious cloud returns. On our drive back to Beirut, we stop for orange juice and see six or seven trucks carrying alternately Christian militia and Lebanese regulars, hurrying toward Beirut. Soldiers appear by the side of the road, are picked up by taxis, and speed off. We never find out what has happened.

Monday

Some relief from the car shortage is in sight. All but two of the motor pool cars were destroyed. A ship carrying three armored cars to Embassy Kinshasa stalled in the eastern Mediterranean after its owner went bankrupt and it was towed into Tripoli. I gather that clouds of piracy and theft hang over the ship, which is only a rusty hulk barely afloat, but someone in the Department had the bright idea that we should get these cars. So the ship is sent down to Beirut. Janin spends the day clambering in and out of the slimy hold, persuading Customs to give us the cars. I hope that lack of armor on other cars won't get anyone killed.

Tuesday

Security at the Charles and Cadmos Hotels is getting much tighter. Today they moved large scoops of earth around the two of them in the hopes of stopping any high-speed, determined car bombers. One [redacted] has decided to make himself scarce, taking a hotel far outside of West Beirut, working alone, and checking in with the Embassy only when necessary.

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Bob Pugh said yesterday that consideration was being given to placing contract guards around some of the apartment buildings with a high concentration of Americans. I think that will prove to be a mistake and hope that Marines are emplaced instead. I leave tomorrow and will be sorry to say goodbye to all the good people that are here.

Wednesday

It is 0300. I look out my hotel window to the Embassy on the seaside, less than a mile away. It is brightly and garishly lit up, the only visible building in the blackness and mist. From here it looks almost like a stage set. It seems right to turn my back and drive away from Beirut in the darkness.

This article is classified SECRET / [redacted] (b)(3)(n) [redacted]